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STATUS OF PREPARATION OF PUBLICATIONS, STUDIES AND DOCUMENTS FOR THE WORLD CONFERENCE

Addendum

Contribution from the United Nations Children's Fund

1. The attention of the Preparatory Committee is drawn to the attached contribution entitled "Children's Rights and Squandered Opportunities" submitted by the United Nations Children's Fund. In its position paper UNICEF identifies two types of emergencies detrimental to the survival and development of children: the first, characterized as "loud emergencies", encompasses natural disasters and armed conflicts; the second, characterized as "silent emergencies", includes those emergencies resulting from entrenched poverty, sickness, lack of knowledge and inadequate services. The results of these emergencies on children have been and continue to be devastating.

2. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, when implemented, will mitigate the effects of present and future emergencies. The UNICEF paper briefly analyses the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and applauds its adoption of a constructive, as opposed to a confrontational approach in its dialogue with Governments. Finally, the paper proposes actions to be taken by Governments, non-governmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations to best safeguard the interests and the rights of the child.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND SQUANDERED OPPORTUNITIES

1. It is a shameful irony that the international community should be approaching the twenty-first century with so much capacity to save and to enrich people's lives while demonstrating so little practical-will to do so. With the cold war shrinking into memory and democratic principles in full bloom, it is even more disturbing that human imagination should find expression in new atrocities, gratuitously inflicted upon others a d upon children and women in particular. 1/ That adult society should acquiesce by failing to pursue every means of redressing violations of human rights is unforgivable. The International Human Rights Covenants and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are unequivocal in their recognition of the indivisibility and universality of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights and yet nations in every region flout them daily.

2. From UNICEF's special vantage as the United Nations agency for children and one of the agencies charged by the Convention on the Rights of the Child to monitor the needs and interests of children, there are two clearly identifiable types of emergency which shout for equal attention. They are: "loud" emergencies encompassing natural disasters and armed conflicts, which displace and disable millions of children, and "silent" emergencies, resulting from entrenched poverty, sickness, lack of knowledge and inadequate services, which cause many more deaths than any famine, flood or war, but which seldom make headlines.

A. Loud emergencies

3. Among the most recent loud emergencies to draw humanitarian relief through UNICEF, have been armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Central America, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan and former Yugoslavia; drought in 11 countries of southern Africa; floods in Ecuador, Lebanon, Pakistan and Paraguay; earthquakes in Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey; volcanic eruptions in Nicaragua and the Philippines; cholera outbreaks in El Salvador and Peru; and the AIDS pandemic in Africa, Asia and the Americas. These and other loud emergencies have displaced and disabled millions of children, causing malnutrition, psychological trauma, unchecked disease and the disruption of family life and household security which are vital to development.

Children in armed conflict

4. During 1992, UNICEF was involved in 50 major humanitarian relief operations, devoting 25 per cent of its resources to children and women in need. By far the most difficult task, and one which has cost the lives of four UNICEF relief workers in the past 12 months, has been the delivery of emergency supplies to innocent victims. In a number of cases, opposing forces have demonstrated their indifference to human rights by blocking or delaying relief shipments to children and women in desperate circumstances. In some cases, UNICEF was able to negotiate brief cease-fires, or "corridors of peace" so that supplies and relief teams could reach the victims, but delays caused unnecessary suffering and cost innocent lives.

Targets of violence

5. It has become clear in a number of conflict situations that military commanders have targeted children and women deliberately. It is not uncommon for boys of 11 years and younger to be abducted, drafted or otherwise coerced into military training and active service. There are documented cases of child soldiers who have been forced to kill members of their own families or to serve as "cannon fodder" while storming enemy frontline or traversing minefields. There have been reports that land mines have been disguised as toys and planted near schools, playgrounds and other places where children would find them. The mass slaughter, rape and torture of young children and women of rival groups are also on the record. And these barbarities, it seems, never end. In parts of Asia, children are being killed or maimed almost daily by the accidental detonation of mines which were sown and forgotten during wars which ended long ago.

Direct casualties of war

6. More than 1.5 million children have been killed in wars during the past decade. More than 4 million have been physically disabled. Some 5 million are in refugee camps waiting for wars to end, and another 12 million have lost their homes. Untold numbers have been psychologically traumatized by exposure to the brutalities of armed conflict. In Sudan, it is estimated that 13 children have died for every soldier lost in combat. In former Yugoslavia, 97 per cent of 300 children surveyed said they had been fired upon, not indiscriminately by mortars or heavy artillery, but by snipers.

7. Before 1945, most victims of war were soldiers, but in more than 150 wars since then, 80 per cent of the 20 million dead and 60 million wounded, have been civilians, and most of them have been children and women. 2/

8. In developing countries, where the vast majority of wars have been fought since 1945, these events are compounded by poverty, drought, famine and other burdens of nature.

9. Generations of children are being killed and disfigured physically and emotionally by adult differences in defiance of the international community's best legal constructs. This madness must end. If society is to have standards there must also be accountability.

Indirect casualties

10. During the past 12 months, wars have cost the lives of some 500,000 children. But for every child lost to bombs and bullets, many more suffer the indirect consequences of separation from parents and family, loss of shelter, food and water supplies and other basic services such as immunization against diseases. Hospitals, clinics, schools and the staff who run them, were also strategic targets in at least one recent conflict.

11. Military spending, the cost of reconstruction and interest payments on debt, are bleeding the world's poorest nations, siphoning scarce capital from health, education and other budgets for child survival and development.

B. Silent emergencies

12. A revolution in communications has meant that the international community can no longer plead ignorance of human rights abuses. Politicians might turn the equivalent of a blind eye, but the world sees death and suffering, up close and in full colour through the eyes of television. Unfortunately, television and the news media are drawn mostly to the dramatic profile of loud emergencies and not to the far greater numbers of children who die each year in slums and poor villages from diarrhoea (3 million) or acute respiratory infections such as pneumonia (3.6 million). The atrocity here is that we know how to prevent this death and suffering for just a few cents or a few dollars per child. We have the capacity to immunize against the six main child killer diseases, to prevent diarrhoeal dehydration with oral rehydration salts, and to prevent blindness and gross mental handicaps by distributing vitamin A capsules and iodizing salt respectively.

Girl child

13. The international community also has the responsibility to draw attention to gross imbalances in the way nations apportion development resources. Gender biases which deny equal opportunity to girls and women are an abuse of human rights and an affront to any rational concept of sustained development. Of the 100 million children between the ages of 7 and 12 who are not in school, a full two thirds are girls. No nation can afford to sideline half its human capacity and potential.

Compassion fatigue

14. Another unfortunate side-effect of our ability to see the world and the suffering of those around us is that a proliferation of loud emergencies compete for our attention and resources. The impact can be seen in what is sometimes called "compassion fatigue" as the public's threshold of tolerance for suffering is ratcheted upwards by graphic repetition of situations which can eventually seem commonplace.

15. One insidious long-term risk, perhaps already manifested in the international community's hesitation to take a stand against today's new wave of human rights abuses, is that abominable acts such as the mutilation of children or the systematic rape and impregnation of thousands of girls and young women, can numb public opinion to the extent that the unthinkable can become the regrettable, the awkward and perhaps eventually ordinary. The same can be said of poverty and want.

Conspiracy of neglect

16. In the roar of media attention given to loud emergencies, it is vital that the world be reminded that no war, flood, drought or famine ever cost the lives of 35,000 children in a single day. That is the toll day after day, from silent emergencies driven by poverty, illiteracy and a lack of basic, inexpensive, lifesaving technologies in the world's poorest communities.

17. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was lauded by the international community for recognizing that economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights are indivisible. The Declaration summarizes those rights as "freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want". There has been almost a conspiracy of silence however on the question of freedom from want and the economic, social and cultural rights which separate the haves from the have-nots. One in every five of the world's people (1 billion) struggles for existence on less than a dollar a day. But while some of the most generous nations on Earth have no difficulty championing the civil and political rights of the poor, almost nothing is heard officially of their economic and social rights, sometimes characterized instead as "goals" or "aspirations". 3/

C. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit

18. The most complete and concise exposition of those rights and the international community's expressed objectives for children, are to be found in the 54 articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children which has been signed by 139 Heads of State or Government.

19. The Convention was adopted by the General Assembly in 1989 and entered into force just nine months later - a record for any international human rights treaty. It has been ratified by more than 130 countries and is the legal framework for monitoring progress in meeting the needs of children. The National Programmes of Action (NPAs) which have been developed in response to the World Summit for Children provide the operational framework for implementing many of the vital provisions of the Convention. Every UNICEF-assisted country programme and NPA reflect the goals for children and development in the 1990s that have been developed to meet the obligations of the Convention and the objectives of the World Summit.

Implementation

20. A 10-member committee of experts in the field of child rights and welfare has been elected by States parties to the Convention to monitor the performance of individual countries on behalf of their children. Nations which ratify the Convention are required to report progress on the implementation of the Convention's principles within two years. As of March 1993, the Committee had received 16 country reports.

21. In keeping with the approaches to implementation taken by the Convention, the Committee relies largely on constructive dialogue rather than confrontation to help Governments move toward full realization of the standards set by the Convention. The Convention recognizes that poorer nations could have difficulty meeting their obligations in the economic and social sectors and calls for international cooperation to assist countries in overcoming technical and financial constraints. UNICEF, as the United Nations "lead agency" for children, is working with Governments and with non-governmental organizations within the framework of regular programmes of cooperation in developing countries and through global advocacy activities to meet the goals for children and development in the 1990s and the obligations of the Convention.

22. The Convention is a framework for policies and programmes benefiting children. The UNICEF Executive Board in 1991 encouraged UNICEF to cooperate with developing countries to operationalize the obligations contained in the Convention by:

(a) Developing national mechanisms to gather gender- and area-specific data on children;

(b) Reviewing legislation pertaining to children;

(c) Undertaking studies on Convention-related issues;

(d) Providing training on the Convention for UNICEF staff and strengthening knowledge about the Convention among governmental counterparts and non-governmental organizations;

(e) Informing and educating children and youth about their rights.

Goals for 1990s

23. World Summit for Children goals in the 1990s include a 50 per cent reduction in malnutrition, illiteracy and maternal mortality rates, universal access to safe water supply and sanitation, and immunization for 90 per cent of the world's children against the main child killer diseases.

A 20/20 proposition

24. UNICEF firmly believes that these and other summit goals are attainable using available low-cost technologies, proven strategies, and relatively little new money. It is estimated that an additional $25 billion a year would be sufficient to implement the goals in developing countries and that most of this could be found by restructuring national budgets and official development assistance (ODA) to give children first call on available resources.

25. At the present time, only about 10 per cent of government spending in developing countries is allocated to such basics as nutrition, health care, water supply, sanitation, primary education and family planning. Industrialized countries also apportion less than 10 per cent of their ODA towards meeting these priority human needs. UNICEF estimates that if developing countries directed 20 per cent of their budgets to the priority needs of children and industrialized nations did the same with their development assistance, some 30 million lives could be saved in the 1990s in addition to many other benefits for children. There is no excuse for failure in the face of such an opportunity. The international community has the technology and the resources to guarantee these things.

26. The "best interests of the child" are universal. They include the right to survival, to healthy development, and to protection from abuse. These things are agreed. They are international standards. But what value do they have in a world which turns its back on hunger and want, on torture, rape, and

the exploitation of children? Children's lives cannot be put on hold while adult society mulls over its obligations towards them. Public commitments have been made. Treaties have been written and ratified. The time to act is now.

D. Recommendations

27. In response to the World Summit for Children and expanding support for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a number of regional consultations and summit-level meetings have addressed the needs, interests and rights of children, and UNICEF has been associated with many of them. The following include recommendations from these meetings and from UNICEF's Executive Board.

28. It is recommended that nations:

First call for children

1. Integrate the Convention on the Rights of the Child into national development plans and support the implementation of National Programmes of Action.

2. Re-examine their budgets and bilateral and multilateral development assistance programmes in the context of the World Summit goals and give a first call to meeting priority human needs.

Legislation

3. Revise existing legislation to reflect the best interests of children and ensure that laws to protect their rights are enforced.

4. Ratify and implement the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women in recognition of its complementarity with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the special needs of the girl child.

Monitoring

5. Create institutions and mechanisms for the effective implementation and monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Monitoring should be supported by the development of social and economic indicators and the collection of disaggregated data.

6. Direct their research and programme resources to the needs and interests of the most vulnerable groups of children, including: the girl child; working and street children; indigenous children; children affected by armed conflict and refugee and internally-displaced children in particular; and children at risk or affected by sale and trafficking, pornography, prostitution and exploitative labour.

Role of family

7. Support the Convention through policies, programmes and activities at community level which involve children and parents as well as NGOs and the media. The family's capacity to meet its obligations towards children deserves special support.

Education

8. Promote education and public information about children's rights and the goals of the World Summit for Children through the media and NGOs.

National action

9. Establish effective national and regional focal points for children and issues related to the Convention.

10. Encourage multilateral institutions and bilateral agencies to help developing countries, with particular attention to the least developed, implement their National Programmes of Action.

International cooperation

11. Encourage all relevant national and international bodies and NGOs to work with the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Centre for Human Rights and Governments, to promote and protect children's rights.

Notes

1/ See letter dated 25 February 1993 from the Executive Director of UNICEF to the Chairman of the Commission on Human Rights (E/CN.4/1993/107).

2/ State of the World's Children 1991.

3/ See also Philip Alston: "Human Rights at the Dawn of the 21st Century", EEC, 22 January 1993.